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ABSTRACT

This booklet examines the need for action to improve the nation's lowest performing public schools, noting the responsibility of teacher unions to participate in the development of workable solutions. Section 1, "Redesigning Low-Performing Schools," discusses reasons for concern, what should be done, and how to implement change. Section 2, "Questions and Answers," discusses why the union supports the redesign or closing of low-performing schools; what are some indicators that a school is low-performing; what are the features of an effective school-redesign process; why low-performing schools should select effective research-based programs; what the union should do to ensure that identified schools effectively implement good programs; and how schools can afford such programs. Section 3, "Background Information," discusses turnaround schools, focusing on what can be done to help struggling schools; the union's responsibility to use tough love when schools do not work; alternative remedies; the effect of teacher and union participation; and systemic improvement. Section 4, "Background Reading," presents suggested reading materials. (SM)

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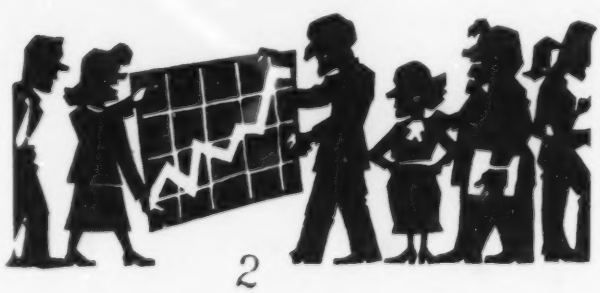

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I.
Redesigning Low-Performing Schools

AFT Convention Resolution
Adopted July 19, 1998

It is as much the duty of the union to preserve public education as it is to negotiate a good contract.

—*Albert Shanker*

I. Why We Are Concerned

America's public school system has always been one of its most important institutions—charged with preparing all students for responsible citizenship and productive adult lives. To fulfill this mission and defend universal public education, the AFT has dedicated itself to raising the standards of academic achievement and student conduct in all schools. We believe that our students and teachers are as capable as any in the world. Given the standards-based reforms we advocate—including clear grade-by-grade standards for student achievement, professional development, curricula and assessments aligned to the standards, and promotion policies and other incentives that reward students for working hard and meeting the standards—our schools can match or surpass the accomplishments of the highest-achieving nations. We also recognize, however, that some schools and some students will need more attention than others. Urgent action must be taken to improve the nation's lowest-performing schools, and we believe that it is the union's responsibility to participate in the development of workable solutions—including, where necessary, starting all over again.

All children need and deserve good

schools—especially those children who are most vulnerable and who, without a good education, are doomed to a continuous and vicious cycle of poverty and failure. While this is not an easy undertaking, the price of continued inaction is intolerable—for the students, many of whom emerge from high school unprepared for further education or a skilled trade; for parents, who want the best for their children; for the school staff, many of whom struggle heroically to compensate for the larger failures of the school system; and for the nation, which must bear the burden of lower economic productivity, increased social service funding, higher crime rates, and a less informed citizenry.

In recent years, the very existence of low-performing schools has served to bring the entire system of public education into question. News stories feature schools where few students graduate, and too many of those who do are barely literate—schools with chronically low test scores and conditions that are so dirty and dangerous that staff and students alike are afraid to walk the halls. In this context, school vouchers and other privatization schemes have begun to gain favor, despite the fact that the abandonment of common public schools would leave the nation more divided, and unequal, than ever. The politically expedient, but educationally bankrupt, policy of "school reconstitution"—stigmatizing and replacing staff, regardless of competence or quality, and without any specific plans to improve teaching or learning—is being implemented or advocated by some courts and some federal, state, and district officials. The new faculty in "reconstituted" schools, however, are likely to have the same inadequate resources, poor professional development, and lack of access to research-tested programs that their predecessors had, while having even less classroom experience to fall back upon.

We cannot afford any more political quick-fixes that will inflict additional injury on students, as well as staff. We need educationally sound solutions to the problems of failing schools, and we need them now.

II. What Should Be Done

As the union representing teachers, classroom paraprofessionals, and other school-related personnel in many of the areas plagued by chronic school failure, it is incumbent upon us to advocate and, where possible, negotiate, for improvement—always insisting that the actions taken are educationally sound and effective. We must take an active role, from the outset, to ensure that teachers and other school staff are treated professionally, are involved in decision making, and are part of the solution. While social and economic inequities can be obstacles to the delivery of equal educational opportunity, there are schools around the country where "at-risk" students

meet high academic standards. We can and must learn from these schools. The challenge before us is to take the research on programs and pedagogical approaches that have been proven to work, and use it to ensure that children and schools succeed.

As educators, we are eager to embrace this challenge and willing to shoulder a full share of the work that meeting it will require. We have also, however, lived through too many educational fads and ill-conceived improvement ideas to accept all reform proposals on faith. We cannot support yet another round of quick-fix gimmicks or ask our members and students to suffer the consequences of painful remedies that have little chance of improving matters. Instead, we seek to help shape and implement effective intervention policies that:

Are grounded in high academic standards

The first essential step in improving low-performing schools—and the U.S. education system as a whole—is to establish clear standards for what students are expected to know and be able to do. This would ensure that all students are held to the same high standards and exposed to the same rich curriculum, regardless of social class or neighborhood, and help put an end to the unequal, uninspiring course of study that many disadvantaged students get locked into from an early age. Without clear standards, substandard work is almost impossible to define, making it that much harder for teachers to spot problems early, demand that students get the extra help they might need, and hold students accountable. Pending the implementation of serious standards-based reform at the district, state, and national level, schools should select improvement programs in which clear and challenging student achievement standards are embedded.

Enforce high standards of behavior

Without clear standards of conduct, a small number of unruly students can disrupt an entire school and impede the learning of all students. The consequences for misbehavior must be fairly and consistently enforced. Students who cannot or will not abide by these guidelines should be placed in an appropriate alternative setting until they demonstrate that they can meet the expected standards of behavior.

Use criteria for the identification of low-performing schools that are clear and understood by all stakeholders

Just as academic standards help students understand—and meet—academic expectations, schools with clear performance standards have a better chance of catching and correcting problems before intervention becomes necessary. The use of widely accepted criteria for low school performance—valid and reliable assessments that show widespread student failure, high levels of violence and disruption, poor management, etc.—will reduce the risk that any school will be misidentified for unfair or arbitrary reasons, and will also give staff,

Poor children and middle class children go to very different school systems in America, and changing this is part of our unfinished agenda. It is a fight we intend to make more strongly than ever, with your help and involvement—and we won't give up until its done!

—SANDRA FELDMAN,
QuEST
Keynote Address,
July 1997

students, and parents a framework by which to gauge the school's progress.

Address the particular needs of the individual school

To ensure that intervention and assistance plans are targeted effectively—and that states' and districts' limited resources are used efficiently—school systems must not only identify which schools are failing, but also why. Thus, the initial identification of low-performing schools isn't enough; it must be followed by comprehensive internal (staff-driven) and external (state- or district-driven) evaluations which can help pinpoint the reasons for failure. Internal factors, such as poor management, staff turnover, unfocused curriculum, or the lack of an effective discipline policy may be critical. Obstacles and challenges, such as high student mobility rates, an influx of non-English-speaking students, inadequate funding, limited access to high-quality professional development, neighborhood crime, or lack of social services in the community, also must be taken into account. Such findings do not change the imperative for corrective action, but their recognition and analysis help form the basis for the development of solutions.

Are backed by solid research

While each low-performing school will have a somewhat different set of needs and priorities, no school—especially one that is already foundering—should be expected to find success by reinventing the wheel. Instead, once the school's most pressing problems have been identified, the improvement process should focus on enabling teachers to choose those programs and instructional practices that have a solid base of research to demonstrate their effectiveness. Facilitation is crucial to this process.

Involve staff and provide them with the professional development, time, and resources they will need to be effective.

Research and common sense tell us that a committed and supportive staff is vital to the success of any school improvement plan. Therefore, to the greatest possible extent, school staff should be given an active role in diagnosing the school's weaknesses and selecting the plans for improvement. It has also been demonstrated that the successful replication of any research-based reform program is largely dependent on the faithfulness of the implementation. Thus, adequate time and resources must be committed to providing all instructional staff (i.e., teachers and classroom paraprofessionals) with the professional development, tools, and materials they need to get the best results.

III. Implementing Change

Just as each school's specific problems will vary, so will their level of severity and intractability. Therefore, we recommend that each state or district intervention policy include a continuum of intervention options.

Many low-performing schools, once offered the proper resources, support, and technical assistance, will leap to make the necessary changes. After an outside audit and a facilitated self-analysis, the principal, faculty, and support staff should have the opportunity to develop and implement their own improvement plan, based on the principles described above.

In other cases, the staff may have been subjected to so many years of poor management, inadequate resources, and futile improvement fads that the school culture—including the relationships between and among staff and students—is so dysfunctional that guided self-improvement is unworkable. For these schools, the internal and external evaluations may indicate a more aggressive intervention strategy. In such cases—or where, after a predetermined time period, it is found that guided self-improvement is not working—the district should discuss specific, additional interventions with the union(s) representing the school's staff. For example, the district might require that the administrative team be replaced and that the staff, in collaboration with the new administrators, vote to select a new academic school-improvement program from a menu of research-based options, pre-selected by a joint union(s)-district panel.

Since staff support is crucial for the effective implementation of a successful academic plan, any faculty member who prefers not to work with the adopted model should be allowed to transfer with dignity, and a team of master teachers with training and experience in the selected model should be recruited into the school. Identification and placement of these

> No parent or student should have to feel that they have to leave a public school in order to get an orderly environment, high academic standards, a challenging curriculum, and decent class sizes.
>
> —Sandra Feldman, *QuEST Keynote Address, July 1997*

"lead" teachers could be made by agreement between the union and the district, with negotiated incentives for such service. Since low-performing schools often suffer from extremely high rates of faculty turnover, it is unlikely that any staff would need to be displaced by this kind of intervention strategy. However, if a limited number of faculty members had to be moved for the academic model to be properly implemented, the dignified treatment of staff should be guaranteed through enhanced or existing contract language (or, in non-bargaining states, policies negotiated between the union(s) and the district) governing involuntary transfers.

If, despite such improvement and intervention efforts, student performance fails to improve within a reasonable time frame and more drastic measures are required (i.e., closing the school), then the union(s) should insist on an educationally sound approach, such as opening a new school with a proven educational program. In no case will "reconstitution" —simply replacing the adults in the building—be accepted as a remedy. If a new school is opened to replace the closed school—whether or not it is located in the same physical plant—it should be designed around a research-based academic improvement plan shaped by stakeholders, including the union(s) and a new administrative team. Staff should receive enough information to make an informed decision about whether they wish to apply. Parents and students should also receive information about the school's new vision of teaching and learning, allowing them to decide if they want to opt out and transfer to another public school.

For instructional positions, staffing procedures should follow the same or enhanced contract language or district regulations that govern any other school closing or the staffing of any new school or new school model (such as a magnet school). Instructional staff affected by the closing should have the right to apply, based on their certification, training, and/or experience with the new model, seniority rights and other negotiated criteria, and should be given priority consideration by agreement between the district and the union(s). Those not selected by the new school must have transfer rights to other schools, without stigma attached, and be assured of job security. Since school redesign should focus on implementing a proven instructional model, except where justified by exceptional circumstances, school-related (non-instructional) personnel should not automatically be displaced. Instead, the new administrative team should deal with any performance problems individually, using existing evaluation and personnel policies.

Under all circumstances, the union will continue to fight for the high academic standards, rigorous curricula, quality teaching, student accountability, and appropriate supports that we believe are needed to ensure that every child succeeds.

II. Questions & Answers

Those of us responsible for public education must never defend, or try to perpetuate, a school to which we would not send our own children...

—SANDRA FELDMAN, *Where We Stand, September 1997*

Why does the union support the redesign, even the closing of low-performing schools?

The AFT believes that low-performing schools can and must be turned around. Their very existence diminishes public confidence in all of our schools, has negative consequences for teachers and other school staff, and above all, denies some children the type of excellent public school education others receive, and all deserve. The AFT's concern on this issue springs directly from its long-standing commitment to improving the quality of the nation's entire educational system, particularly by raising both academic and content standards. The AFT believes that urgent action must be taken to improve the nation's lowest performing schools—and that it is the union's responsibility to participate in the development of educationally sound and effective solutions. AFT supports sound improvement efforts, including those that result in "redesign," a cooperative labor-management process through which a failing school that has not responded to other interventions might be closed and reopened as a new school with a proven educational program—through a process that assures respectful and fair treatment of school staff. "Redesign" should not be confused with "reconstitution," which replaces and stigmatizes school staff—regardless of competence—without providing a systematic plan to improve teaching or learning.

What are some indicators that a school is low-performing?

These indicators are meant to aid in the initial identification of a school that is in need of assistance. But before any formal identification is made and before an assistance strategy is recommended, a more comprehensive investigation procedure

should take place. This should include site visits by evaluation teams—whose composition must include faculty representation as well as a facilitated self-analysis by school staff.

1. Lack of academic standards: Without clear standards detailing what every student is expected to know and be able to do, it is impossible for schools to determine whether student achievement is "good enough."

2. Low student performance: Schools in which a large proportion of students test near or at the bottom of the scale on valid and reliable tests of student achievement are in clear need of help.

3. Lack of improvement over time: Low-performing schools don't show a pattern of improvement in multi-year comparisons.

4. High levels of disruption and violence: Failing schools often exhibit a general atmosphere of chaos and confusion: disorderly classrooms, lax discipline, and frequent fights.

5. High rates of student absenteeism: Students who are unsafe or unmotivated are more likely to skip school, less likely to learn, and more likely to score poorly on tests of achievement.

6. High rates of staff absenteeism: High rates of staff absenteeism may indicate a host of underlying problems—such as a lack of discipline and safety—that can lead to a low morale among staff.

7. High dropout rates: High dropout rates are a sign of student disengagement and are often related to low student achievement.

8. High rates of staff turnover: Low-performing schools are characterized by high rates of staff turnover and an unusually high complement of new or inexperienced teachers.

9. A negative school atmosphere: Failing schools are often characterized by a school climate that indicates mismanagement, indifference, and neglect. Buildings are disorderly; there is little opportunity for staff participation in decision making; resources are mismanaged; and parents are not involved in the school.

What are the features of an effective school redesign process?

Turning around struggling schools will require the commitment and support of all those involved with the school—teachers, administrators, parents. It is also imperative that the intervention process is shaped by policies that address the following critical areas:

1. Are grounded in high academic standards;
2. Enforce high standards of behavior;
3. Use criteria for the identification of low-performing schools that are clear and understood by all stakeholders;
4. Address the particular needs of the individual school;
5. Are backed by solid research; and
6. Involve staff and provide them with the professional development, time, and resources they will need to be effective.

Why should low-performing schools select effective research-based programs?

Implementing effective schoolwide change is a massive undertaking because it touches upon all areas of a school's culture and practice. To achieve whole school reform and improvement, educators must tackle a comprehensive set of initiatives including appropriate professional development, high-quality curricula, and a number of organizational changes.

Some school faculties have taken on such reforms themselves, and a small few have succeeded. But no school—especially one that is struggling—should be expected to find success by reinventing the wheel.

Over the past decade, several promising educational programs have emerged. Programs like High Schools that Work, Success for All, Core Knowledge, Direct

Under all circumstances, the union will continue to fight for the high academic standards, rigorous curricula, quality teaching, student accountability, and appropriate supports that we believe are needed to ensure that every child succeeds.

AFT Convention Resolution (Adopted July 19, 1988)

Instruction, Consistency Management and Cooperative Discipline, and the Comer School Development Program are based on years of research on successful practices. When properly implemented, these programs have proven to raise achievement levels of at-risk students in low-performing schools. Simply put: *These programs provide schools with practices and materials that work.*

And, these programs do not leave schools to begin these reforms alone. Instead, they provide step-by-step technical assistance and support that schools need to maintain improvement.

With proven programs and practices combined with ongoing support, struggling schools are now able to sustain improvements, outlast fads, achieve at high levels, and succeed.

What should we do to ensure that identified schools effectively implement good programs?

The initial identification of low-performing schools should be made using criteria that are fair and widely accepted. School systems must not only identify which schools are in trouble, but also why. It is important to investigate to determine the origins of the school's problems—which, in turn, can help to suggest the most appropriate and effective solutions. Since it is largely up to school staff to make the great efforts necessary to turn the school around, they should have a major voice in selecting the research-based solutions to be implemented. By guaranteeing that staff play a formal role in program selection, the school also benefits from their expertise as educators and provides them with a greater stake in making the program work.

How can schools afford these programs?

Schools and districts can use a variety of funding sources to help cover the costs associated with a promising program. For example, schools that qualify for schoolwide Title I status can put Title I funds toward the implementation of a promising program. In addition, schools or districts can apply for a Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration grant. This three-year federal program will provide $145 million to help improve low-performing schools–especially those serving economically disadvantaged students. Called Obey-Porter (after its congressional sponsors) or the Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) program, it will fund schools to select and adopt whole school reform models that are based on solid research, that can demonstrate their effectiveness, and that can prove they can be replicated. Schools may also be able to combine existing funds, seek additional grants, or apply to local foundations and community or business partners for assistance. For guidance and a list of resources on financing reform, visit the AFT's *Raising Student Achievement* Internet site: http://www.aft.org/edissues/rsa.

III. Background Information

For generations of Americans, public education has been the path to economic and personal success. It has been the source of and the force behind an educated citizenry that has made the United States the envy of nations around the world. However, public education has too often fallen short of its goal to adequately serve all of our children, particularly those most in need—the poor, the educationally disadvantaged, and the recently arrived immigrant. This failure to educate all students well has eroded support for public education and provided ammunition for those who would dismantle public education in this country. We should be doing whatever we can to help fix what is not working well in our schools and to help right what is wrong so that every American student can have the same advantage, the same opportunity, to succeed on his or her own. Making every school better is the only way we can do our part to silence the arguments of those who seek to decimate public education. The AFT and many of its affiliates are taking a leading role in developing and promoting policies and practices that show promise for raising student achievement, as the article that follows illustrates.

Turnaround Schools

What can—and must—be done to help struggling schools

Ten years ago, Manhattan's P.S. 1 was a school that was drifting. Student achievement was stuck at the lower end of the district's average, educators felt isolated, and administrative turnover was high. Things began to turn around, however, after staff undertook a comprehensive self-assessment, with the help of the district and the union, that opened lines of communication and expanded school decision making. It also brought into focus a true school mission, centered on literacy and supported by staff, administrators and parents.

Today, there is a true sense of teamwork

at the school. Reading scores have risen steadily, and the school is involved in an ambitious pilot project to bring internationally benchmarked academic standards to U.S. schools. Changing the school climate was "a very difficult job and it took years," remembers Roberta Grabler, a literacy and resource teacher at P.S. 1. "The key was to keep the dialogue moving to solutions and remedies, rather than accusations and blame, and to always try to have an educational focus."

Thousands of miles away, Morris Park elementary in Minneapolis had struggled for years with abysmal student achievement and chronic breakdowns in discipline. There was a deeply embedded climate of fear, blame and mistrust in the school community. Three-quarters of children were reading at or below the first-grade level with no coherent instruction program. In fact, the problems were so grave that closure seemed likely. Instead, the district and union cooperated on a total redesign of the school. The first order of business was to bring in a research-based reading program after which the union and district developed a plan for bringing into the school administrators and staff who supported the program and believed they could make it work. Those educators at Morris Park who chose not to work under the new design, or who were not chosen in the restaffing process, were given the opportunity and support needed to transfer with dignity to other schools.

Today, Morris Park is a school on the upswing: Reading scores are climbing, discipline referrals are down, and there is a new feeling of hope, says first-grade teacher Darlene Hultquist. "Discipline is under control and morale is high," says the eight-year veteran at the school. "I personally enjoy coming to work every day."

Two different schools, two different cities, two different intervention strategies based on two different situations. The differences between Morris Park and P.S. 1 are certainly there. But there are similarities between the two that are even more noteworthy.

Both worked to fashion an improvement program that allowed proven instructional models, fair treatment and buy-in at the building level to become the driving forces. They supported the process with additional resources, professional development and outside expertise. In both cases, changes were made to rebuild the school community and restore a shared mission—without sacrificing the dignity and rights of existing staff at the school.

And in both cases, educators, administrators, the districts union, and the community found common ground in the belief that all schools, regardless of circumstances, must find a way to become the type of place that any parent would want to send his or her child.

It's a message that AFT president Sandra Feldman has carried early and often into the community in her first year in

office. "I don't think any parents should have to send their children to failing, troubled schools," she said just moments after being elected AFT president. "I have fully supported the complete restructuring and redesign of such schools, and I have seen them improve."

Tough love

When schools don't work, the union has a responsibility to help them improve or, as a last option, negotiate their closing and redesign, she would later tell an audience at the union's 1997 QuEST conference. Such schools not only hurt students and staff at low-performing schools but also "cast a long shadow" over public education as a whole—corroding public confidence in the system, providing grist for media exposés that deflect attention away from successful schools and fueling efforts to dismantle public education through vouchers and other means. "Put very simply and most starkly, I propose that we do not defend or seek to perpetuate failing schools to which we would not send our own children," said Feldman.

That position reflects the spirit of a resolution on redesigning low-performing schools adopted this year by the AFT executive council. It was anything but easy to formulate, remembers AFT vice president Tom Mooney, chair of an AFT task force that drafted the resolution and provided assistance and advice to union leaders grappling with the problem of low-performing schools. Many task force members knew first-hand of places where the problem of low-performing schools had been spun into mindless "solutions." Some policies were focused on simply reshuffling staff, standing back and waiting for the "magic" to happen—with no attention paid to the resources and programs needed to actually improve teaching and learning. In that type of climate, shouldn't the union simply dig in its heels and never give an inch when debate turned to redesigning low-performing schools?

Task force members "understood that there were good and horrible solutions afield," Mooney says. "The crux of the debate became: What is our responsibility as union leaders and educators? To lead or simply to react when something terrible appears?"

The first option was the only one that made sense for a professional union like the AFT, argued many task force members. Several recalled the late Albert Shanker's comment, "It is as much the duty of the union to preserve public education as it is to negotiate a good contract."

The task force also examined many proven educational programs such as Core Knowledge, Success for All, Direct Instruction and High Schools that Work. Ensuring that a research-based program became the centerpiece of reform was absolutely critical, most agreed, and the union has responsibility to make that happen.

An education system that accepts low-

performing schools as a "given" is both immoral and short-sighted, Mooney stresses. When school failure becomes acceptable, "we risk the complete loss of public confidence in the public schools," he warns. "It's clear we have to be pro-active about these problems."

Consider the alternative

Some 23 states already have laws addressing low-performing schools through a range of remedies that include restaffing, sometimes called "reconstitution," and school shutdowns. Eight others are considering such legislation. Courts in several states also have forced the redesign of low-performing schools in an effort to restore racial and ethnic balance. In the next decade, changes to the federal Title I law will allow corrective action, including school staff changes, for participating schools not making "adequate yearly progress" in at least reading and math. Clearly the remedies are proliferating—and the evidence shows they need the involvement of teachers and their elected representatives to be fair and effective.

Just ask teachers and classified staff in El Paso, Texas. Alan Platt, formerly a teacher at Guillen Junior High, remembers the shabby treatment he and other staff members received when the district two years ago decided to restaff the school, a chronically underfunded building serving the poorest community in the city. The superintendent announced that Guillen staff would have to reapply for their positions just a few days before the end of the 1995-96 school year. When about 75 percent of staff was forced to look for employment elsewhere, "there was tremendous stigma" attached to their previous employment. "We were treated like damaged goods," says Platt, who later found a position teaching social studies at nearby Jefferson High School.

Teachers and staff at Bel Air High School, part of El Paso's Isleta school district, had seen their achievement scores plummet after being saddled with what most considered a ridiculous reform strategy imposed by the superintendent. Students would be allowed to choose their entire course of study—no strings attached. It was supposed to follow the college model under the superintendent's plan. "Most of us knew what was going to happen," says Jerry Duke, an AP English teacher at the school for 23 years. "Harder teachers with high academic standards had no students." There was a falloff of about 40 percent in AP classes, students who hadn't taken math for two years and were pursuing studies in guitar, soccer and history were failing miserably on state standardized tests, and—because Bel Air was now a dismally low-performing school—the staff was overhauled.

New assignments for Bel Air were determined arbitrarily. Duke, who had seen his students go on to every major university in the nation, is now consigned to general track classes at his new school and plans to

leave teaching this month. "We were treated as pariahs—those horrible Bel Air teachers," he says. "I know I'm a good teacher. Many of my former students have written me to say thanks for the strong grounding my courses gave them. But I'll work as a greeter at Wal-Mart before I ever set foot back in a public school."

AFT affiliates throughout the state have been battling for more of a say in decisions affecting low-performing schools. In Corpus Christi, where the AFT local has won a stronger presence through an exclusive consultation agreement with the district, the process of school redesign has been difficult but better than in districts which give teachers almost no say. Roy Miller High School was restaffed in 1995-96 in connection with a court order, and Steve McGaugh, a science teacher at the school, says there was more advance notice and more teacher say in the new school design than in districts like El Paso. "We knew a year prior that it would be restaffed," says McGaugh, "and it gave teachers an opportunity to analyze whether they would be comfortable in the new approach, which is accelerated block scheduling." While McGaugh says he has deep concerns about the success of the school design, he emphasizes that "union participation has made a tremendous difference in giving teachers more of a voice."

Turning it around

Good things are clearly beginning to happen in districts where educators and their unions have the opportunity to help transform low-performing schools.

At P.S. 1, the high administrative turnover, isolation and lack of focus that plagued the school in the 1980s is as obsolete as the "power tie." Instead, teachers at this elementary school serving a high-poverty, mostly immigrant section of the Bowery now use words like "focus," "mission," "achievement" and "community" when they talk about the school. Today, 30 teachers regularly and voluntarily gather every Friday for early morning roundtable discussions—where education is always the first order of business. "The talk is always around children and how to improve children's learning," says Amy Hom, a staff development specialist at the school. "I've been in this school for the last five years, and there is more collaboration among teachers." There are more opportunities to meet and confer and new teachers feel less isolated, she adds.

Reading scores have more than doubled

since the early 1990s, and the school has found success as one of four New York City pilot sites participating in the New Standards Project, a national effort to bring internationally competitive academic standards to U.S. schools. Recent scores from P.S. 1 on assessments tied to the project show that almost half of students are performing at acceptable levels based on these rigorous world-class benchmarks.

What made the difference? Teacher Roberta Grabler believes it was a long process of assisted self-assessment by staff, community building within the school and goal setting—key features prescribed in the AFT's resolution on low-performing schools for buildings that require less drastic intervention in order to improve. The union and district cooperated on a plan several years ago to bring teachers, administrators and parents together in P.S. 1 to develop a mission statement and improvement plan, with the help of facilitators from the United Federation of Teachers. The school also received a major new commitment for professional development (4 percent of school funds go to professional development today, as opposed to the customary 1 percent), and a UFT-run teacher center was added to the building.

The teachers center, located on the third floor of the building, plays a central role in the process of improvement. Teachers visit the center regularly to consult with staff and find professional materials based on their individual needs. There are also study groups and workshops offered at the center, along with opportunities to attend professional development sessions at the central teacher learning center at UFT headquarters. Michele Schlifstein, teacher center staff member at P.S. 1, says the center also serves as an impromptu daily meeting ground for teachers and gives special consideration and direction to new teachers at the school. "Anyone at any time in the day can come in and work with me," says Schlifstein, adding, "it's exciting to see teachers take responsibility for their own learning. They see things going well at the school and they feel motivated."

The motivation also appears contagious. P.S. 1 found funding to provide several weeks of reading/language arts instruction last summer—and 400 students showed up for the voluntary, half-day program. "We even had six students show up a day before school started, they were so excited," Hom said.

A more aggressive level of intervention was called for at Morris Park elementary in Minneapolis. The school struggled for years with a reputation of being "a school run by the kids," a school that had once posted 800 write-ups for misbehavior on buses in a single academic year. The school's chronically low test scores showed that Morris Park was "lacking direction from a curriculum standpoint," remembers Darlene Hultquist, a first-grade teacher for the past eight years at the school.

"The community was unhappy and tak-

ing their children out of the school, the staff was very angry and frustrated that the administration had allowed discipline to evaporate at the school," says Minneapolis Federation of Teachers president Louise Sundin. "Things just continued to spiral down, and we agreed that this would be a good place to try to start again."

MFT collaborated with the district on a "fresh start" program that brought in a research-based reading model, in this case Success for All, and a new building principal. Prior to the 1995-96 school year, staff was allowed to transfer out of the school or to interview for Morris Park positions in the next school year. About a third of instructional staff and all support staff continued at the school, based on interviews that showed their belief in the new instructional program and dedication to making it work. Both permanent and probationary employees were given priority standing for openings at other schools, counselors were provided to help soften the stress of the transition, and there was a guarantee that staff that didn't return would not be laid off or fired. "We stressed that many of these teachers had been victims of the problems at Morris Park and that there must be assurances that teachers who leave wouldn't be stigmatized or on the street," Sundin said.

Angela Baxter, a kindergarten teacher at Morris Park, believes the process was hard but necessary. Before the redesign "there was no staff teamwork and there was a lack of trust. Things just weren't working. There was a general agreement that things had to change."

The redesign has helped the school make a big improvement. Testing last spring showed that 46 percent were reading at first-grade level, a big jump from years prior when, without the focus of a research-based program, 70 percent failed to meet that test, Baxter says. Also critical is the preservice and inservice training that staff has received.

"When you walk in to the building today, you feel the difference, and you see it. Students seemed to pick up on it right away, all of a sudden the behavior that had been treated one way was not tolerated. It's not the right solution for every school, but it was definitely the right solution for us."

Systemic improvement

The experience at Morris Park has been so positive that it helped the union and district reach agreement on a comprehensive school improvement strategy, including strategies for low-performing schools, in its latest contract agreement. Many sections of the strategy are taken directly from the AFT resolution on low-performing schools, emphasizes Sundin, who believes the contract is a perfect place to address such issues.

The contract also was an engine of change at P.S. 154 in Harlem, which two years ago was placed on a list of New York state schools in danger of being closed, based on low student achievement with lit-

tle improvement over several years. There are more than 90 New York City schools on this state list; typically they are given up to three years to implement and demonstrate an effective new school plan.

LeRoy Barr, a math instructional specialist at the school for the past six years, said that teamwork and a coherent instructional approach had been missing for years at the school—and it was hurting performance. The union and district helped the school rediscover direction by establishing a redesign committee that included teachers and other school staff, administrators, parents and students. Barr was a member of the team, which spent several months assessing the school's strengths and weaknesses. The team also reviewed recommendations from the district and from state audit teams and designed a comprehensive improvement plan.

The improvement plan included extended school hours, and a proven reading program, Success for All, which more than 80 percent of faculty voted to adopt, and additional staff development. The improvement plan also called for staffing changes implemented under guidelines included in the UFT contract. The contract provides that, in such instances, a "personnel committee" that includes two union representatives, administrators and parents will select new staff. Teachers who do not return are given priority transfers and first choice of available positions in the district for which they are qualified.

Interviewing for the positions at P.S. 154 focused on "understanding of the mission of the new school—did it coincide with my individual professional goals," explains Charles DeBerry, a third-grade teacher at the school who returned after the redesign. He says the process, while difficult, was fair and that teachers both returning and leaving the school felt supported. "People felt quite naturally a certain amount of tension and anxiety, and the union made sure that everyone was contacted and placed," says Barr, who is the UFT chapter leader at the school.

Last year was P.S. 154's first under the new redesign, and there are already some signs of improvement. Math and reading scores are up, and the school should come off the state list if improvement can be maintained and strengthened.

One of the best features of the redesigned school, DeBerry says, is the two days a week that teachers in each grade have reserved for common preparation. "It allows us to talk about what's working in the classroom and what isn't," he says. "That's a big change for a staff that used to isolate themselves and work in their own classroom environment."

But DeBerry also stresses there is nothing magic about the process. "This is hard work, turning a school around, and it takes time. But I feel we can prevail."

(This article, by Mike Rose, was printed in the December 1997/January 1998 edition of the AFT's newspaper for K-12 members, the American Teacher.*)*

IV. Background Reading

General Materials

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School Improvement Models Recommended by the AFT

Consistency Management & Cooperative Discipline (CMCD)

Consistency Management & Cooperative Discipline, College of Education, University of Houston, Houston, TX 77204-5874; Phone: 713/743-8663; Fax: 713/743-8664; E-mail: CMCD@uh.edu; Internet: http://www.co.uh.edu/~freiberg/cm

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Core Knowledge

Core Knowledge Foundation: 2012-B Morton Drive; Charlottesville, VA 22901; Phone: 800/238-3233; Fax: 804/977-0021; E-mail: coreknow@www.comet.net; Internet: http://www.coreknowledge.org

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Direct Instruction

Association for Direct Instruction, P. O. Box 10252, Eugene, OR 97440; Phone: 800/955-2464; e-mail: ADIhome@aol.com; Internet: http://darkwing.uoregon.edu/nadiepl

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Success for All

Success for All: John Hopkins University; 3505 North Charles Street; Baltimore, MD 21218; Phone: 800/548-4998; Fax: 410/516-8890; Internet: http://jhunix.hcf.jhu.edu/~reneek/sfa.html

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AFT Materials

Raising Student Achievement: A Resource Guide for Redesigning Low-Performing Schools

How can the union help to save failing schools? Resolute reform efforts, based on high standards of conduct and achievement and research-proven programs and practices, offer hope for real improvement. This resource guide was designed to provide local union leaders and members with ideas, information, and materials for fixing schools that aren't working. It includes: profiles of research-proven schoolwide improvement programs; materials to audit a school for its most pressing needs; and a review of contract language that supports reform and protects the rights of staff during the transition. *137 pages. Item no. 370. Single copy $15; $10 each for five or more. (July 1997)*

Raising Student Achievement: An Internet Resource Guide for Redesigning Low-Performing Schools

Access information about how to fix one of this nation's most persistent problems: schools that don't work. This Internet resource guide presents ideas, information, and materials that educators and policy makers can use to help foster educationally sound efforts to turn around low-performing schools. The site includes the AFT policy statement on redesigning low-performing schools, legislative updates and guidance, and profiles of selected districts that have turned around their lowest performing schools through the process recommended by the AFT. Also included is sample contract language, information on research-proven programs, guidance on how to effectively select and implement such programs, guidance on visiting schools, links to additional resources on school redesign, and more. *Visit the site at: http://www.aft.org/edissues/rsa*

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The Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration Program, or Obey-Porter

This is a three-year federal program that, in its initial year, provides $145 million to help improve low-performing schools—especially those serving economically disadvantaged students. The program funds schools to select and adopt schoolwide reform models based on solid research, that can demonstrate their effectiveness, and that they can be replicated. This Internet site includes more information about whole school reform, an overview of the CSRD legislation, guidance to states or districts on how to apply for CSRD funds, and up-to-date links to resources and events on whole school reform. *Visit the site at: http://www.aft.org/edissues/csrd*

Building on the Best, Learning from What Works: Research Review of Promising Educational Programs

- Six Promising Schoolwide Reform Programs; *28 pages (July 1998)*
- Seven Promising Reading and English Language Arts Programs; *32 pages (Jan. 1998)*
- Five Promising Remedial Reading Intervention Programs *(June 1999)*

Single copy free. Also available on the Internet: http://www.aft.org/edissues/rsa/guide/promising.htm

An Educator's Guide to Schoolwide Reform

This comprehensive, consumer-friendly guide to 24 widely used programs designed to improve student achievement in low-performing schools was sponsored by the AFT, NEA and three administrator groups: the American Association of School Administrators, National Association of Elementary School Principals, and National Association of Secondary School Principals. The publication, prepared by the independent American Institutes for Research, evaluates the programs' performance and capabilities based on evidence of increased student achievement, first-year costs, and implementation assistance provided to schools. Among its findings, the guide concludes that:

- Eight programs show "strong" or "promising" evidence of positive effects on student achievement; and
- First-year implementation costs range from $12,000 to more than $588,000, reflecting the wide range in curriculum, staffing, equipment, and training requirements placed on schools.

141 pages plus appendices. $12.95 each; $10 each for five or more. Also available on the Internet: http://www.aft.org/edissues/schlwrfm.htm (1999)

Redesigning Low-Performing Schools: It's Union Work (Video)

Making every school a school where we'd like to send our own children is a top priority of the AFT. Our children deserve no less, our union must not expect less. This video illustrates the process of turning around low-performing schools. The hard work of turning these schools around *is union work.* Included are first-hand accounts of educators, administrators, union leaders and others who have been collaboratively involved in school redesign in schools across the country. Scenes of classrooms in which promising programs are being implemented as part of a school's improvement plan are shown as well. *$10 each. (July 1999)*

Reaching High Standards

What are the elements of an education system that would enable educators to demand—and get—top academic performance from students? This booklet, derived from a resolution adopted by the AFT's 1996 national convention, describes four essential elements in constructing such a system—rigorous academic standards, assessments to measure student progress toward the standards, incentives for students to do the work that learning requires, and the opportunity for students to receive the extra help they might need to reach the standards. Five initiatives that educators can follow now, before comprehensive reforms are in place, are also included. *11 pages. Item no. 234. $2 each; 50 cents each for 10 or more, with further discounts available to affiliates ordering in bulk. (Nov. 1996)*

Setting Strong Standards

To help bring some clarity to the confused and often controversial issue of "standards," the AFT has developed a set of criteria for members and others to use in developing or reviewing student achievement standards. The criteria offer a clear vision to educators and policy makers at all levels of what useful standards should look like. The booklet includes excerpts of actual standards that illustrate many of the criteria. *14 pages. Item no. 175. Single copy $2; $1 each for five or more. (June 1996)*

Making Standards Matter 1998

Which states are working to develop higher academic standards? Which are making them clear and specific enough to be useful at the classroom level? How many are developing assessments linked to the standards? Which are planning to provide struggling students with the extra help they will need? How does your state measure up? This annual study offers a state-by-state progress report in these key areas. *164 pages. Item no. 265. $10 each; $8 each for five or more. Also available on the Internet: http://www.aft.org/edissues/standards98 (Nov. 1998)*

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Every Child Reading: An Action Plan

The Learning First Alliance, a coalition of 12 national education organizations committed to improving student learning in our public schools, sponsored this action paper on reform of reading instruction. The paper outlines research-based practices for achieving the goal of reading success for all children and presents an action plan that parents, teachers, administrators, policy makers, and other stakeholders can implement to begin en effective and comprehensive reform of reading instruction. The plan addresses three critical areas for action: professional development for teachers; early childhood and community outreach; and research, development, and materials. *28 pages. Item no. 180. Single copy $3; $2 each for five or more. Also available on the Internet: http://www.learningfirst.org/publications.html (June 1998)*

Reaching the Next Step: School-to-Career—One Path to Better Schools (A Multimedia Training Kit)

This kit provides a variety of tools to facilitate the development of an effective school-to-career (STC) program. Included is the AFT's recommendation for a quality STC program; a 20-minute video which highlights examples of how schools have implemented AFT's recommendation; a video discussion guide for all school-to-career stakeholders; *Improving Low-Performing High Schools: Ideas and Promising Programs for High School Reform;* and a self-assessment instrument for evaluating the current status of your STC program. *Item #283. $20 each. (June 1999)*

Principles for Professional Development

To help its affiliates review, evaluate, improve, and design professional development programs, the AFT has prepared a set of guidelines for professional development. Among the central themes the guidelines highlight are the need for professional development that helps teachers gain deep knowledge of the subjects they teach; that reflects current research on teaching and learning; that leads teachers to be intellectually engaged with their colleagues; and that provides teachers sufficient time, support, and resources to master new content and pedagogy. *9 pages. Item no. 176. Single copy $2; $1 each for five or more. Also available on the Internet: http://www.aft.org/edissues/teacherquality/prodev1.htm (1997)*

Setting the Stage for High Standards: Elements of Effective School Discipline

What are the key elements of a discipline system that would provide all students with a safe and orderly learning environment, and help set the stage for high academic standards? This companion to *Reaching High Standards* identifies six essential elements of effective school discipline: effective classroom management; clear districtwide discipline codes; consistent enforcement of the codes; programs to modify low-level student misbehavior; alternative placements for disruptive students; and support for families and communities working to develop character in children. *15 pages. Item no. 235. $2 each; 50 cents each for 10 or more, with further discounts available to affiliates ordering in bulk. Also available on the Internet: http://www.aft.org/edissues/elements (July 1997)*

Setting the Stage for High Standards: A School Discipline Resource Manual

This manual, which contains the above booklet, provides resources to help union locals work within school districts to develop and implement an effective discipline system. In addition to resource listings, the manual also includes an overview of the problem of poor school discipline; an analysis and samples of good discipline codes; sample contract language on discipline; criteria and descriptions of quality alternative programs and settings; and information on effective strategies that locals and state federations have used to implement sound policies and programs. *394 pages. Item no. 236. Single copy $15; $10 each for five or more. (June 1999)*

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